

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

June 04, 2014

Remarks by President Obama at at 25th Anniversary of Freedom Day

Castle Square

Warsaw, Poland

12:10 P.M. CET

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Hello, Warsaw! (Applause.) Witaj, Polsko! (Applause.)

Mr. President; Mr. Prime Minister; Madam Mayor; heads of state and government, past and present -- including the man who jumped that shipyard wall to lead a strike that became a movement, the prisoner turned president who transformed this nation -- thank you, Lech Walesa, for your outstanding leadership. (Applause.)

Distinguished guests, people of Poland, thank you for your extraordinary welcome and for the privilege of joining you here today. I bring with me the greetings and friendship of the American people -- and of my hometown of Chicago, home to so many proud Polish Americans. (Applause.) In Chicago, we think of ourselves as a little piece of Poland. In some neighborhoods, you only hear Polish. The faithful come together at churches like Saint Stanislaus Kostka. We have a parade for Polish Constitution Day. And every summer, we celebrate the Taste of Polonia, with our kielbasa and pierogies, and we're all a little bit Polish for that day. (Applause.) So being here with you, it feels like home. (Applause.)

Twenty-five years ago today, we witnessed a scene that had once seemed impossible -- an election where, for the first time, the people of this nation had a choice. The Communist regime thought an election would validate their rule or weaken the opposition. Instead, Poles turned out in the millions. And when the votes were counted, it was a landslide victory for freedom. One woman who voted that day said, "There is a sense that something is beginning to happen in Poland. We feel the taste of Poland again." She was right. It was the beginning of the end of Communism -- not just in this country, but across Europe.

The images of that year are seared in our memory. Citizens filling the streets of Budapest and Bucharest. Hungarians and Austrians cutting the barbed wire border. Protestors joining hands across the Baltics. Czechs and Slovaks in their Velvet Revolution. East Berliners climbing atop that wall. And we have seen the extraordinary progress since that time. A united Germany. Nations in Central and Eastern Europe standing tall as proud democracies. A Europe that is more integrated, more prosperous and more secure. We must never forget that the spark for so much of this revolutionary change, this blossoming of hope, was lit by you, the people of Poland. (Applause.)

History was made here. The victory of 1989 was not inevitable. It was the culmination of centuries of Polish struggle, at times in this very square. The generations of Poles who rose up and finally won

independence. The soldiers who resisted invasion, from the east and the west. The Righteous Among the Nations -- among them Jan Karski -- who risked all to save the innocent from the Holocaust. The heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto who refused to go without a fight. The Free Poles at Normandy and the Poles of the Home Army who -- even as this city was reduced to rubble -- waged a heroic uprising.

We remember how, when an Iron Curtain descended, you never accepted your fate. When a son of Poland ascended to the Chair of Saint Peter, he returned home, and here, in Warsaw, he inspired a nation with his words -- "there can be no just Europe without the independence of Poland." (Applause.) And today we give thanks for the courage of the Catholic Church and the fearless spirit of Saint John Paul II. (Applause.)

We also recall how you prevailed 25 years ago. In the face of beatings and bullets, you never wavered from the moral force of nonviolence. Through the darkness of martial law, Poles lit candles in their windows. When the regime finally agreed to talk, you embraced dialogue. When they held those elections -- even though not fully free -- you participated. As one Solidarity leader said at the time, "We decided to accept what was possible." Poland reminds us that sometimes the smallest steps, however imperfect, can ultimately tear down walls, can ultimately transform the world. (Applause.)

But of course, your victory that June day was only the beginning. For democracy is more than just elections. True democracy, real prosperity, lasting security -- these are neither simply given, nor imposed from the outside. They must be earned and built from within. And in that age-old contest of ideas -- between freedom and authoritarianism, between liberty and oppression, between solidarity and intolerance -- Poland's progress shows the enduring strength of the ideals that we cherish as a free people.

Here we see the strength of democracy: Citizens raising their voices, free from fear. Here we see political parties competing in open and honest elections. Here we see an independent judiciary working to uphold the rule of law. Here in Poland we see a vibrant press and a growing civil society that holds leaders accountable -- because governments exist to lift up their people, not to hold them down. (Applause.)

Here we see the strength of free markets and the results of hard reforms -- gleaming skyscrapers soaring above the city, and superhighways across this country, high-tech hubs and living standards that previous generations of Poles could only imagine. This is the new Poland you have built -- an economic "Miracle on the Vistula" -- Cud nad Wisłą. (Applause.)

Here we see the strength of free nations that stand united. Across those centuries of struggle, Poland's fate too often was dictated by others. This land was invaded and conquered, carved up and occupied. But those days are over. Poland understands as few other nations do that every nation must be free to chart its own course, to forge its own partnerships, to choose its own allies. (Applause.)

This year marks the 15th anniversary of Poland's membership in NATO. We honor Polish service in the Balkans, in Iraq and Afghanistan. And as Americans, we are proud to call Poland one of our strongest and closest allies. (Applause.)

This is the Poland we celebrate today. The free and democratic Poland that your forebears and some who are here today dreamed of and fought for and, in some cases, died for. The growing and secure Poland that you -- particularly the young people who are here today -- have enjoyed for your entire lives.

It's a wonderful story, but the story of this nation reminds us that freedom is not guaranteed. And history cautions us to never take progress for granted. On the same day 25 years ago that Poles were voting here, tanks were crushing peaceful democracy protests in Tiananmen Square on the other side of the

world. The blessings of liberty must be earned and renewed by every generation -- including our own. This is the work to which we rededicate ourselves today. (Applause.)

Our democracies must be defined not by what or who we're against, but by a politics of inclusion and tolerance that welcomes all our citizens. Our economies must deliver a broader prosperity that creates more opportunity -- across Europe and across the world -- especially for young people. Leaders must uphold the public trust and stand against corruption, not steal from the pockets of their own people. Our societies must embrace a greater justice that recognizes the inherent dignity of every human being. And as we've been reminded by Russia's aggression in Ukraine, our free nations cannot be complacent in pursuit of the vision we share -- a Europe that is whole and free and at peace. We have to work for that. We have to stand with those who seek freedom. (Applause.)

I know that throughout history, the Polish people were abandoned by friends when you needed them most. So I've come to Warsaw today -- on behalf of the United States, on behalf of the NATO Alliance -- to reaffirm our unwavering commitment to Poland's security. Article 5 is clear -- an attack on one is an attack on all. And as allies, we have a solemn duty -- a binding treaty obligation -- to defend your territorial integrity. And we will. We stand together -- now and forever -- for your freedom is ours. (Applause.) Poland will never stand alone. (Applause.) But not just Poland -- Estonia will never stand alone. Latvia will never stand alone. Lithuania will never stand alone. Romania will never stand alone. (Applause.)

These are not just words. They're unbreakable commitments backed by the strongest alliance in the world and the armed forces of the United States of America -- the most powerful military in history. (Applause.) You see our commitment today. In NATO aircraft in the skies of the Baltics. In allied ships patrolling the Black Sea. In the stepped-up exercises where our forces train together. And in our increased and enduring American presence here on Polish soil. We do these things not to threaten any nation, but to defend the security and territory of ourselves and our friends.

Yesterday, I announced a new initiative to bolster the security of our NATO allies and increase America's military presence in Europe. With the support of Congress, this will mean more pre-positioned equipment to respond quickly in a crisis, and exercises and training to keep our forces ready; additional U.S. forces - in the air, and sea, and on land, including here in Poland. And it will mean increased support to help friends like Ukraine, and Moldova and Georgia provide for their own defense. (Applause.)

Just as the United States is increasing our commitment, so must others. Every NATO member is protected by our alliance, and every NATO member must carry its share in our alliance. This is the responsibility we have to each other.

Finally, as free peoples, we join together, not simply to safeguard our own security but to advance the freedom of others. Today we affirm the principles for which we stand.

We stand together because we believe that people and nations have the right to determine their own destiny. And that includes the people of Ukraine. Robbed by a corrupt regime, Ukrainians demanded a government that served them. Beaten and bloodied, they refused to yield. Threatened and harassed, they lined up to vote; they elected a new President in a free election -- because a leader's legitimacy can only come from the consent of the people.

Ukrainians have now embarked on the hard road of reform. I met with President-elect Poroshenko this morning, and I told him that, just as free nations offered support and assistance to Poland in your transition to democracy, we stand with Ukrainians now. (Applause.) Ukraine must be free to choose its own future for itself and by itself. (Applause.) We reject the zero-sum thinking of the past -- a free and independent Ukraine needs strong ties and growing trade with Europe and Russia and the United States

and the rest of the world. Because the people of Ukraine are reaching out for the same freedom and opportunities and progress that we celebrate here today -- and they deserve them, too.

We stand together because we believe that upholding peace and security is the responsibility of every nation. The days of empire and spheres of influence are over. Bigger nations must not be allowed to bully the small, or impose their will at the barrel of a gun or with masked men taking over buildings. And the stroke of a pen can never legitimize the theft of a neighbor's land. So we will not accept Russia's occupation of Crimea or its violation of Ukraine's sovereignty. (Applause.) Our free nations will stand united so that further Russian provocations will only mean more isolation and costs for Russia. (Applause.) Because after investing so much blood and treasure to bring Europe together, how can we allow the dark tactics of the 20th century to define this new century?

We stand together because we know that the spirit of Warsaw and Budapest and Prague and Berlin stretches to wherever the longing for freedom stirs in human hearts, whether in Minsk or Caracas, or Damascus or Pyongyang. Wherever people are willing to do the hard work of building democracy -- from Tbilisi to Tunis, from Rangoon to Freetown -- they will have a partner in our nations. For in the struggles of these citizens we recall our own struggles. In their faces we see our own. And few see this more clearly than the people of Poland.

The Ukrainians of today are the heirs of Solidarity -- men and women like you who dared to challenge a bankrupt regime. When your peaceful protests were met with an iron fist, Poles placed flowers in the shipyard gate.

Today, Ukrainians honor their fallen with flowers in Independence Square. We remember the Polish voter who rejoiced to "feel the taste of Poland again." Her voice echoes in the young protestor in the Maidan who savored what she called "a taste of real freedom." "I love my country," she said, and we are standing up for "justice and freedom." And with gratitude for the strong support of the Polish people, she spoke for many Ukrainians when she said, "Thank you, Poland. We hear you and we love you." (Applause.)

Today we can say the same. Thank you, Poland -- thank you for your courage. Thank you for reminding the world that no matter how brutal the crackdown, no matter how long the night, the yearning for liberty and dignity does not fade away. It will never go away. Thank you, Poland, for your iron will and for showing that, yes, ordinary citizens can grab the reins of history, and that freedom will prevail -- because, in the end, tanks and troops are no match for the force of our ideals.

Thank you, Poland -- for your triumph -- not of arms, but of the human spirit, the truth that carries us forward. There is no change without risk, and no progress without sacrifice, and no freedom without solidarity. (Applause.)

Dziękuję, Polsko! God bless Poland. (Applause.) God bless America. God bless our unbreakable alliance. Thank you very much. (Applause.)